

Sustainable development in Europe

01.09.01



Sustainable
Development Commission

EU STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Comments on the consultation paper from the UK Sustainable Development Commission¹

Introduction

1. The UK Sustainable Development Commission welcomes the decision of the European Heads of State and Government to ask the European Commission to prepare a Sustainable Development Strategy for Europe. It also welcomes publication of the consultation paper, allowing at least a limited degree of public consultation on these important issues. The Commission urges the European Commission and the European Council to allow a further period of consultation on the Strategy itself, either before the Council adopts the Strategy or during its further development.

Context and vision

2. Sustainable development means meeting the needs of the present without prejudicing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. Many features of today's global economy are not sustainable in this sense. Environmental degradation is worsening and prejudicing the future. Renewable resources are not being renewed and some are in danger of collapse. Non-renewable resources are being depleted at rates that cause concern about the development of substitutes in sufficient time to meet future needs. Social and equity problems between and within countries are persistent and in some areas worsening.

3. Meaningful strategies for sustainable development need to address these problems head on and propose solutions that will challenge prevailing orthodoxies and vested interests. They must create a vision and a political impetus for making radical changes in a more sustainable direction. They must show how the environment and natural resources can be better managed, and poverty and social injustice be corrected. They must show how the economy can be transformed in such a way as to achieve these environmental and social goals at the same time as promoting prosperity and true welfare for all. The strategy for a country or region needs to show how these objectives can be achieved both within the area concerned and through its relationships with the rest of the world.

4. The materials so far provided for the EU Strategy make only a very modest beginning towards creating a true sustainable development strategy for Europe. A true European strategy needs to create a new and potent European vision of how a sustainable Europe will differ from the present evolution of Europe and from other even more unsustainable economies such as the USA. It should show how the environment and natural resources can be much more effectively protected, and how social justice can

¹ The Commission was established in October 2000, replacing the UK Round Table and British Government Panel on Sustainable Development. Its main role is to advocate sustainable development across all sectors in the UK, review progress towards it and build consensus on the actions needed if further progress is to be achieved. Members have agreed that their mission is “to inspire sustainable development in government, the economy and society”. Details of the Commission, including its membership and work programme, are on the website www.sd-commission.gov.uk

be advanced. It will need to tackle the impact of Europe on the wider world, and in particular the adverse impacts of some of our policies (such as on fishing and agriculture) on sustainability and prosperity in the developing world. It should be a manifesto for radical change, inspired and driven by the political leaders of Europe and the Commission, and generating wide public support and commitment throughout Europe.

5. Such a vision from Europe is urgently needed at the present time as the world prepares for the Earth Summit in Johannesburg in September 2002. A strong and renewed European commitment to sustainable development built around an effective strategy could play a key part in influencing others and enabling the Summit to achieve a significant move forward for sustainability throughout the world. The consultation paper is peculiarly parochial in both its outlook and its ambitions.

Leadership, governance and structures

6. The key requirement for progress towards a more sustainable Europe is political leadership, from the Heads of Government and from the President and members of the European Commission. The Strategy should set challenging, long-term targets, to give a clear steer to industry and the public sector to allow them to respond in the most cost-effective way over time. The targets should be subject to public consultation. Sufficient time must be allowed for all this, pointing to the need for a further period of policy development after the Council meeting in Gothenburg.

7. But leadership must be mediated through appropriate and supportive structures and modes of governance. Many of these appear to be lacking at present. Making good such structural deficiencies will put in place vital building blocks for the kind of policy development referred to above and for the longer-term future. This should be a key focus of the Strategy at this initial stage, and will send a strong signal both to the citizens of Europe and to the wider world.

8. First, there should be a central policy co-ordinating unit for sustainable development in the Commission. Such a unit should be responsible directly to the President, building on the current SD Task Force. It would not take over policy responsibilities from the various DGs where it quite properly lies, but would guard and develop the Strategy and would monitor and stimulate progress, especially in the integration of policy goals towards a more sustainable approach overall. It could also encourage the systems of reporting and staff training we recommend (paragraph 17).

9. There is as yet no mechanism for a sustainability appraisal of Commission Directives or policy initiatives. This is a fundamental requirement. The use of environmental impact assessments, or strategic environmental assessments, in Europe has always been inadequate. Now the gap is much more serious because sustainable development requires a sophisticated attempt to integrate a range of policy objectives and, if necessary, to trade-off between them. And without proper sustainability appraisal processes the proposed central unit would have limited influence or power.

10. There must be a comprehensive and accountable process of Parliamentary oversight of sustainable development, perhaps in the form of a new Parliamentary Committee. This should ensure that the co-ordination unit and sustainability appraisal are properly functioning, that DGs have indicators and targets, and that they are regularly called to

account for their contribution to sustainable development. Without such a mechanism, the current enormous problems in integrating sustainable development policies and practices are bound to persist.

11. The institutions of governance in Europe are not good at allowing sustainable development to evolve organically from the grass roots. Policies developed at the highest level should be enhanced by approaches and aspirations evolving from below amongst the regional and local structures that reflect the diversity of Europe. The 'top' level of interactive governance touched on above, and a 'grassroots' level of participatory democracy, must complement each other. We welcome the forthcoming White Paper on Governance in Europe and urge that it should address these issues specifically.

12. Finally in this section, we strongly support the proposal for a stakeholder body, somewhat analogous to ourselves and other national councils for sustainable development. This would both advise the European Commission on the development and implementation of the Strategy and of related policy and programmes, and reach out into the wider community to encourage action. The European Consultative Forum has served something of this purpose, but a body is now needed with a wider remit both as to its policy focus and its objectives. It should be sponsored by the central co-ordinating unit, and report to the President, though DG Environment could obviously play an important supportive role.

Policies and funding

13. Through its financial support mechanisms, the European Union has within its control one of the most effective tools for influencing the future development of Europe. These can promote sustainable or unsustainable activities. Successful realignment of Community funding streams to ensure they positively support sustainable development, and are coherent one with another, is fundamental to assisting Europeans to adapt to living within the carrying capacity of our planet.

14. If the Union's Sustainable Development Strategy is to have any significant effect, it is essential that its major funding streams - including the CAP, Structure, Cohesion, Accession and international development funds - are recast so as to make sustainability goals a central objective. This applies equally to loans via, for example, the EIB. We attach particular importance to reform of subsidy policies for agriculture, transport and energy, so that they work for, rather than against, a sustainable future.

15. To ensure the Strategy is effective, the EU needs, as a first step, to:

- recast funding policies so that they have a positive objective of delivering sustainable social, economic and environmental objectives;
- in particular, and with highest priority, phase out subsidies which directly undermine such objectives;
- apply sustainability appraisal (as noted above) to all EU funded or financed policies, programmes and projects;
- make clear sustainable development criteria a pre-requisite for selection of all EU funded or financed policies, programmes and projects;

- establish sustainability indicators against which to measure and make necessary modifications to policies, programmes and projects, to ensure that they become and remain aligned with sustainable development objectives.

16. In addition, the Commission should make wise and constructive use of its own direct impact on society through its own procurement policies, and the criteria for public procurement in the Union as a whole. These should be much more supportive of goals such as improved resource efficiency.

17. All of this will require commitment within each DG, including training of staff to raise their awareness and knowledge of the issues. Each DG should be required to draw up proposals for making its own contribution to sustainable development, and for training its staff to deliver it. They should be required to report progress made and planned on a regular basis.

Challenges for Europe

18. The consultation paper identifies a number of sustainability challenges for Europe. We largely agree that these are key challenges and are well characterised. We wish to comment on just one of them: ageing.

19. The tenor of the chapter on ageing is accurate insofar as it recognises the impact of the ageing population on public health, the work force and pensions. However, it is pessimistic in its approach to these three issues and fails to recognise the more positive picture that could be created. We comment briefly on each in turn.

20. The paper emphasises the extra need for health care that will be required and the burden this could place on public finances. However, it implies that a longer life means more health care – in effect that, as the years of life expand, so do the years of morbidity. This is not necessarily the case and much of the thrust of public health medicine in this country is directed towards decreasing the period of morbidity. On the whole people are living longer and *healthier* lives which allow them to remain active both physically and intellectually over a number of extra years.

21. It is true that there has been a trend over the last decade or so to employ a younger workforce and for people over the age of 50 to find it difficult to remain in employment. That was driven by a number of influences: that younger people were cheaper to employ; the belief that older people could not adapt to new technologies; a predominant culture of youth throughout society. However, it is not necessarily an irreversible trend. As younger members of the workforce become scarcer, employers will turn to alternative areas of supply. Some major companies are already employing older people because they perceive them as having particular virtues and skills. There is no reason to think that this approach will not continue and spread. It may, however, require more flexible working practices. If people are to work for much longer, they may wish to have greater opportunity to intersperse their working lives with breaks for various reasons (children, travelling, education, etc), not least to have longer periods of ‘refreshment’ to sustain a longer working life. It will also be necessary for individuals and companies to place greater emphasis on continuing education.

22. Funding for old age is already a problem, although the scale of the difficulty is not the same throughout Europe: the UK, for example, has moved much further in

addressing this problem than some other countries. The problem will, however, become much greater if the period of retirement expands along with life expectancy. But the extension of *active* years, together with a change of attitude by employers and work force, should help considerably.

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